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Belleville East's new media center will be 'highlight of the campus'

BY RICKEENA J. RICHARDS
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Belleville East High School students can expect one more gift when they return to campus after their holiday break.

That is how Brad Schmidt, East's library director, describes the school's new 18,000-square-foot media center, the final phase of a renovation project designed to update and make better use of the 43-year-old campus with a focus on energy efficiency.

"This is going to be one of the highlights of the campus," he said. "It will be a place students are drawn to."

The media center and the school's new cafeteria made up the final phase of the renovation project with a total cost of about \$8 million. Mike Christ, executive vice president of the construction company Impact Strategies, said the project will not only be finished on time, but also come in under budget by a little more than \$400,000, or about 10 percent.

Superintendent Greg Moats said the district will use some of the savings to create more handicap-accessible parking spaces where the current library space is located, near the school's tennis courts. For now, he said it will serve as a contingency fund for anything that could come up before all the renovations are complete and that it could go toward paying off the \$33 million in bonds approved four years ago to pay for the renovations.

He said the administration is "very pleased" with the renovations.

"The improvements to the East campus are just really remarkable and will be even better when the new media center opens in January," he said.

Crews have been busy working on the final touches to the media center, which is located in the old cafeteria space. When completed, it will include three computer labs, each with about 30 computers, audio systems and SMART boards, access to wireless Internet and a cyber cafe, where students can buy coffee and watch news broadcasts on a flat screen TV.

It will also include a storage area, house all the school's computer servers and be more handicap-accessible with a new elevator.

Principal David Kniepkamp said it will make for "an excellent educational environment" that will offer students an inviting atmosphere with a collegelike feel.

"It's a state-of-the-art facility that we're really proud of," he said.

Schmidt said the media center will be able to accommodate more people than the current library space, which has been located in mobile units for the past 2 1/2 years.

"We're very cramped," he said, noting how three classes in the current space is a tight fit, whereas the new center can easily accommodate at least five classes with room to spare. "This (media center) is three times the size of the space we're in now."

He said the center will also allow for more than double the number of computers for students, increasing from about 60 to about 140. He anticipates it will appeal to both students and teachers alike.

In addition to the new cafeteria and media center, the project includes new classrooms, glass-enclosed hallways with safer spacing, the construction of a covered walkway linking Buildings N and S and an addition for the new cafeteria. There are also new air-conditioning and heating units, transformers, electrical wiring, lights, window sills, doors and ceiling and floor tiles campuswide.

Christ said the most important thing for people to know about all the improvements is that they are worth it.

"The Belleville East campus has been expanded and renovated and upgraded and is ready to serve this community well for the foreseeable future," he said. "It's a night-and-day difference as you walk on this campus today with all the improvements that have been made. ... Their tax dollars have been well-spent."

Moats said crews finished the \$460,000 repairs at Belleville West High School, where rainwater was leaking into classrooms in the building's second and third floors, in mid-November.

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